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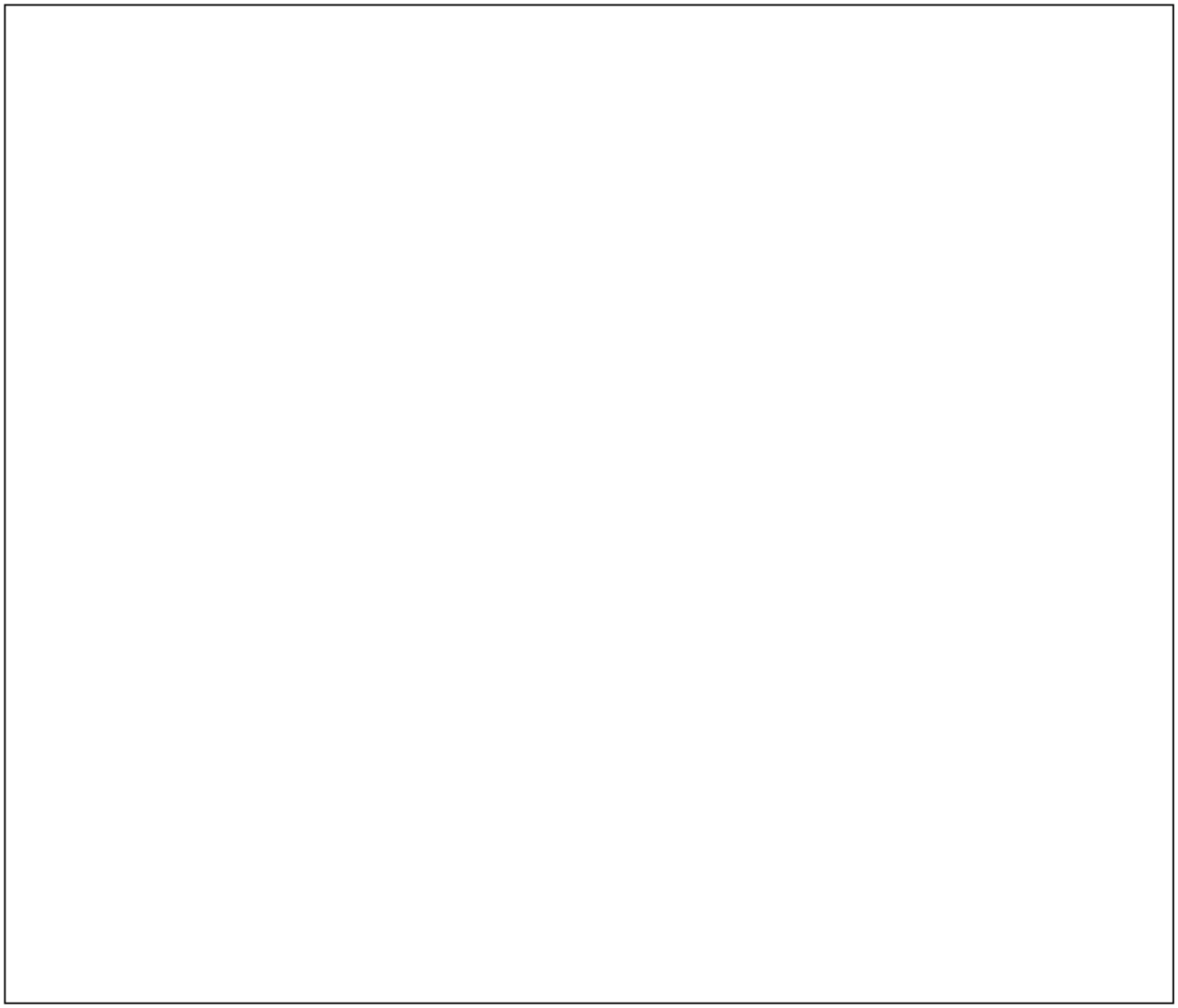
		Page
Articles	**Democracy in Central Africa: Review of Progress and Areas of Concern**	1

Six years after the current wave of democratization began in Sub-Saharan Africa, the 10 countries of Central Africa display a mixed record of progress and setbacks that underscores the fragility of the process. This article, the first in a planned series, provides a snapshot of the region's progress and problems encountered in the democratic transition.



Africa Review

Articles

Democracy in Central Africa: Review of Progress and Areas of Concern

Editor's Note: This article, the first in a planned series, provides a snapshot of progress in democratic transition and consolidation in Central Africa and of problems that could undermine the process in several countries. The criteria used are based on observable evidence as reported by press. Readers are cautioned that the definition of democracy and the assessment of its institutional and behavioral components are the subject of considerable debate among political theorists, who do not agree on any single framework for evaluating progress and vulnerability.

Six years after the current wave of democratization began south of the Sahara, the 10 countries of Central Africa[1] display a very mixed record of progress and setbacks that underscores the fragility of the process.

- All but Chad, Rwanda, and Zaire have held their first multiparty national elections. Although planned by Cameroon and Congo for 1997, no Central African state has yet completed a second national election essential to consolidate initial gains. impoverished Sao Tome and Principe, citing lack of resources, postponed its second election that had been scheduled for March until June and may postpone it indefinitely.

- In Sao Tome, rebellions soldiers staged a short-lived coup last August that was reversed by Angolan and Western donor pressure. In addition to poor economic and living conditions the soldiers cited institutional failings as a reason for their attempt, a cryptic reference to protracted squabbling between the President and the National Assembly-approved Prime Minister under a constitution intended to limit the former's powers.

Extension of elected government and decentralization of greater responsibilities to the local level is proceeding slowly. To the chagrin of Cameroon's opposition, the Biya regime has appointed—as municipal law allows—government delegates who function as mayors in eight major urban areas that the opposition won in last January's local elections, which the ruling party claimed it swept except in the west and north. Local elections that Equatorial Guinea held last September were virtually meaningless; municipal councils there are largely powerless and underfunded, and President Obiang's party manipulated the results in its favor.

- Two transitions—Burundi and Rwanda—have failed because of ethnic inability to share power. Their transitions were built around constitutions that provided for winner-take-all elections and presidential-dominant unitary states that made no arrangement for giving the losing ethnic minority a stake in the system, such as through federalism or sharing posts in the cabinet and other national institutions. Unlike Burundi, Rwanda's transition never made it to elections. Rwanda's 1993 peace accord between its then Hutu government and Tutsi rebels called for the formation of a broad-based interim government and elections by mid-1995. But the government collapsed with President Habyarimana's assassination in April 1994, the explosion of genocide, and the takeover by armed Tutsi exiles who promised democratic elections no earlier than 1999. In Burundi, hostile Tutsi maneuvering has rendered the elected

[1] Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, Sao Tome, and Zaire.

Hutu government virtually powerless. In September 1994 it accepted a 55-45 percent powersharing arrangement with the Tutsi minority, which accounts for about 14 percent of the population but dominates the armed forces.

The Old Guard Clings On

In the face of domestic and international pressures for political liberalization, the majority of Central Africa's old-guard leaders have managed to maintain power—and access to the perks of office for their ethnic followers—by controlling the pace and scope of democratization:

- Authoritarian leaders wearing democratic cloth in first, but flawed multiparty presidential elections have retained office in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Presidents Deby of Chad and Mobutu of Zaire expect to follow suit.

- New elected leaders have appeared only in Central African Republic, Congo, and Sao Tome. Burundi's late President Ndadaye, its first elected Hutu head of state, was assassinated in 1993 in a failed Tutsi coup, three months after taking office.

- Opposition parties have managed to gain a proportionally larger share of seats in legislatures primarily in those states where new leaders also emerged in first elections. Cameroon's old-guard President, whose ruling party lacks an elected parliamentary majority, nevertheless has co-opted two small opposition groups to still dominate the National Assembly.

Difficulty Sharing Power

Central African leaders, both old and new, and their political opponents display in varying degree a winner-take-all mentality that often makes difficult the compromise and powersharing that are essential to functional democracy.

- The majority of heads of state display limited tolerance for legal opposition, as seen by their resistance to demands to level the playing field through reform of electoral rules and machinery.

- Opposition elements in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon, in particular, are subject to frequent harassment by regime security forces.

- Most leaders and ruling groups are willing to accept at least a partially free press, but they are reluctant to permit private radio and TV stations or allow the opposition more than limited access to state-owned broadcast media. In Sao Tome, no restrictions exist, but no private radio stations have appeared.

In Central Africa, government concern about the emergence of private broadcast stations is underscored by Rwanda's and Burundi's experiences with ethnically divisive radio. In Rwanda, the former "Radio Mille Collines" was the Hutu extremists' primary vehicle for inciting and directing the 1994 mass genocide of Tutsis. In Burundi, the budding radical Hutu insurgency relies on a radio station known as "The Voice of Democracy" to stir support. In Gabon, the main opposition's unlicensed "Radio Liberty" was set up before the controversial December 1993 presidential election and destroyed two months later by security forces. While not a "hate radio," its inflammatory broadcasts increased political tensions,

Civil Violence Stimulates Reform and Window Dressing

Having drawn back from earlier confrontation that provoked months of civil strife in Brazzaville in 1993 and riots in Libreville in early 1994, ruling leaders and opposition groups in Congo and Gabon, respectively, are pursuing reconciliation agreements. In Congo, fighting between rival paramilitary party militias resulted in 2,000 deaths, destruction of 10,500 structures, and displacement of over 300,000 people. A UNESCO peace forum and an OAU envoy played key mediating roles in Congo, as did the French in Gabon. By contrast, Cameroon's more intransigent President Biya has refused outside good offices and responded to bouts of opposition violence with largely token changes and security clampdowns:

- Congo reheld disputed legislative elections in several districts in late 1993 and early 1994; the opposition made gains but left the President's coalition in

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Democracy in Central Africa:

Evidence of Progress . . .[a]

	Cameroon	Central African Republic	Chad	Congo	Equatorial Guinea	Gabon	Sao Tome nad Principe	Zaire
Multipartyism allowed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Last head of state contest free/fair		✓	NA	✓			✓	NA
First national election held	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Second national election completed								
Elected local government	✓			✓	✓		✓	
Significant tolerance of opposition							✓	
Opposition has seats in elected legislature	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Legislature or judiciary show some independence		✓		✓			✓	
Private broadcast media permitted				✓		✓	✓	

Democracy in Central Africa:

. . . Factors for Concern[a]

	Cameroon	Central African Republic	Chad	Congo	Equatorial Guinea	Gabon	Sao Tome nad Principe	Zaire
Transition behind schedule			✓					✓
Leader manipulating reform/backtracking	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓
Flawed elections	✓		NA		✓	✓		NA
Lack of independent election commission	✓	✓		b	✓	✓		✓
Institutional paralysis								✓
Armed party/paramilitary militia				✓				
Military pay, living conditions	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Insurgent groups/civil war			✓					
Separatist agitation	✓							

[a]Rwanda and Burundi's failed democratic transitions are not included.

[b]It is unclear whether Congo will create an independent electoral commission for its 1997 elections. When partial legislative elections were held in 1993 and 1994, following months of civil strife, supervision took place under the terms of the August 1993 Libreville Accords by the College Arbitral, a multinational panel of seven magistrates provided by the EU, OAU, Gabon, and France.

Note: NA = Not Applicable.

Democracy in Central Africa: Opposition Representation in Elected Legislatures[a]

	Seats	Ruling Party	Ruling Coalition Majority	Opposition (one or more parties)
Cameroon	180	88	109	71
Central Africa Republic	86	33	44	42
Congo	125[b]	47	67	57
Equatorial Guinea	80	68		12
Gabon	120	64		56
Sao Tome and Principe	55	27		28

[a] Chad, Rwanda, and Zaire have yet to elect multiparty legislatures. In Burundi's June 1993 legislative election, assassinated President Ndadaye's Hutu party won 65 of 81 seats for an absolute majority, with Tutsi parties holding the remainder.
[b] One seat is vacant.

slim control of parliament. Long delayed local elections were held in mid-1994, and opposition leaders gained control of most major cities, including Brazzaville. Authorities have promised to allow private radio and TV stations as called for by the 1992 constitution. Leaders have pledged to control and demobilize militias; militiamen who meet recruitment standards are being integrated into the regular armed forces, starting with a batch last year. While not all militia members have laid down their arms and skirmishes erupt from time to time, no outbreaks of major violence have occured. press reports indicate that the government appears to have defused the mutiny that ex-militia Army recruits staged last month by giving into demands for regularization of their pay and administrative status. The incident highlights the uncertainties and tensions surrounding the integration of ill-disciplined irregulars.

- On the heels of growing opposition complaints of footdragging by President Bongo, Gabon's Prime Minister announced in mid-February that the government will finally implement the October 1994 Paris Accords, which were ratified by popular referendum in mid-1995. The signing of the accords defused political tensions exacerbated by the flawed 1993 presidential election that erupted into violent clashes between opposition demonstrators and security forces in February 1994. An independent election commission is to be established, followed by local elections by April and legislative elections by May. Meanwhile, the ruling party-dominated National Assembly has passed legislation to replace the presidential guard with a new force that is ostensibly forbidden to be used against the opposition. Three independent radio stations, including one close to the main opposition, are now licensed to broadcast.

- In Cameroon, separatist sentiment among the Anglophone minority has grown dramatically in the past year because of Francophone President Biya's refusal to meet demands for federalism and recognition of cultural differences. Token constitutional reforms rammed through the regime-dominated National Assembly last December provide for elected regional assemblies with limited power while preserving a strong presidential, unitary state. Late President Ahidjo abolished the country's 12-year-old experiment with federalism in 1972 using a referendum dominated by the more populous Francophone East Cameroon. In 1961, the former British-administered West Cameroon held a UN plebiscite resulting in its northern portion joining Nigeria and the rest joining ex-French Cameroon in what is today's independent state.

Looking Ahead

Movement in Central Africa toward greater democratization will remain slow, turbulent, and subject to setbacks or reversals. Unlike Africa's other regions, crude oil reserves in Gulf of Guinea states—Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, and Zaire are oil exporters—and Chad add to the stakes in the political struggle between incumbent ruling and opposition groups. Determination by most leaders to resist any more sharing of power than is necessary, together with weakly performing economics, risks adding to the cynicism of disadvantaged groups about the value of

France: Mixed Signals on Democracy in Central Africa

France, the Western power with the most substantial interests in Central Africa[a], has displayed mixed signals in supporting the region's tenuous and often chaotic democratization process. Competing interests and increasingly limited resources cause Paris to temper encouragement of democracy with a desire to also maintain stability, protect its privileged trade and investment access, and avoid the appearance of neocolonial interference:

- *France maintains that each African country must be allowed to pursue political liberalization at its own pace. Paris has displayed tolerance for backtracking and flawed elections, as in Cameroon, but refused to provide election observers for Equatorial Guinea's blatantly fraudulent presidential election held last February.*
- *Paris has sought to push Chad to reorganize and downsize its bloated armed forces during the transition there, but has had little success. [redacted] France will maintain its 840-man troop contingent in N'Djamena until democratic elections can be completed.*
- *Apparently motivated by a desire to avoid another Niger—where military coup leaders cited the unworkable French-modeled constitutional system—[redacted] Paris is attempting to convince Chadian President Deby to make last minute changes in the draft constitution already scheduled for popular referendum on 31 March.*
- *Paris did not publicly condemn Congo's recent revolt by Army recruits, nor did it speak out over other pay-based mutinies that occurred earlier in Chad and Central African Republic.*

[a] Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, and Gabon comprised French Equatorial Africa prior to their independence in 1960. In addition, Paris shows special interest toward French-speaking Burundi, Rwanda, and Zaire, all ex-Belgian colonies. Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, has been drawn into the French orbit by its inclusion into the French-backed CFA franc zone.

[redacted]

democracy. Partisan manipulation, uneven electoral playing fields, and poor economic management provide an environment for military intervention and eruption of civil strife that may encourage the spread of ethnic militias or add to insurgent and separatist sentiment. [redacted]

Peace pacts in Gabon and Congo will be tested, as rival groups head into second-ever elections this year and next. Fledgling democracy in the Central African Republic is threatened by the country's virtual bankruptcy that could spur military or labor unrest. Although calm on the surface, a deep divide remains between Sao Tome's military and its fragile elected government with living conditions unlikely to improve substantially. In Congo and Chad, respective efforts to integrate party militia into the military and to downsize the armed forces require careful management to avoid potential regime-threatening unrest. Resistance to meaningful change by recalcitrant leaders in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon reduce avenues for peaceful pursuit of reform. [redacted]

Difficult and slow-moving transitions in Chad and Zaire may be approaching an end-stage and potentially messy first-ever democratic elections:

- [redacted] if long-promised elections in Chad are held by mid-year, a coup beforehand or afterward is possible should

Democracy in Central Africa: Two-Year Election Calendar

		1996			***1997***
31 March	***Chad:***	*Popular referendum on new pluralist constitution, to be followed by scheduling of presidential and legislative elections.*	*March*	***Cameroon:***	*Second multiparty legislative election since 1992 to be held.*
June	***Sao Tome and Principe:***	*Tentative date for second multiparty presidential election since 1991; may be postponed indefinitely, however.*	*May*	***Congo:***	*Second multiparty presidential election since 1992 is due.*
April	***Gabon:***	*Local elections due to be held by this date under October 1994 Paris Accords.*	*June*	***Congo:***	*Second multiparty legislative election since 1993 is due.*
May	***Gabon:***	*National legislative election due to be held by this date under October 1994 Paris Accords.*	*July*	***Zaire:***	*Transition deadline for national elections to be held.*
July	***Gabon:***	*Elections for Parliament's upper house, the largely consultative Senate, are due under the October 1994 Paris Accords.*	*October*	***Cameroon:***	*Second multiparty presidential election since 1992 is due.*

President Deby or a faction of his northern minority-dominated regime conclude that their control of power—and of the country's future oil wealth—would be jeopardized by the more populous south. Low-level dissidence by several long existing insurgent groups will remain a debilitating headache for whoever rules.

- In Zaire, President Mobutu is leaving no stone unturned as he prepares to manipulate his victory in elections that are due by July 1997 unless the transition slips further. If it becomes clear that Mobutu risks losing, he and senior Army officers may refuse to cede control. Any spillover from neighboring Burundi of intensified ethnic fighting and new refugee flows could worsen the security and electoral environment in eastern Zaire.